

Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT AMORY, JR.

February 9, 1966  
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Amory, did you have any contacts with the President, or with John F. Kennedy, before 1961?

AMORY: Yes, they weren't terribly close. But I was in law school when he was in college, and he came into the Spee Club, which was the undergraduate club which I had been in and maintained strong interest in, and I knew him then as a bright and attractive undergraduate. By no means

he would even charge us with action: "He wants you to get hold of the Secretary of State, or the Assistant Secretary of State, and be sure that that message is answered by noon," or something -- little trivial, ministerial odd things. But you did get this strong impression that his first interest in the morning was the world intelligence, that he really focused on it, that nothing would stand in the way of his grasping everything from the smallest detail that was going on and being very interested in it.

O'CONNOR: Now, are you relating these instances to the Bay of Pigs, or was this the procedure that developed during the year?

AMORY: No. What I'm leading up to now is the Berlin Wall which is the next interesting item in which I figured a little bit. One of those days we brought along a

story that [Nikita S.] Khrushchev and the East German authorities were worried about the exodus. It was by no means a clear prediction of a wall. Nobody predicted that. And then suddenly you had this barrier, which wasn't a wall at first. So many people think the wall was built over night. It was a single strand of barbed wire and a lot of armed guards, and the refugees were turned back. Mac and I sat around at first alone early in the morning, and he said, "What the hell do we do now?" By this time I was quite freewheeling, at least with him, and I didn't worry about making policy recommendations. I said, "Mac, there is one thing you can do right here and now, and that is to vividly enhance your commitment to Berlin. I think you ought to send a cable to [Lauris] Norstad (or whoever was in command then) to send

another combat team in this afternoon over the Autobahn." Then Taylor came in, and Mac said, "What do you think about that, Max?" Max said, "That's a hell of a bad idea. We're in a dangerous situation here; this would further maldeployment. Any troops that we have in Berlin will be casualties in the first six hours of fighting. We can't afford to give up five thousand good armed men out of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] shield to that." Well, Mac was more or less on my side, and we pressed that all day. But Kennedy decided in favor of Max Taylor, and the Joint Chiefs agreed with Max. I think two days went by, and then Willy Brandt, the Mayor of Berlin, came in with a personal cable to the President saying exactly what I had said, "For God's sake, send the combat team." So with much hoopla, that afternoon

the combat team went in, and Lyndon B. Johnson flew to make the commitment politically dramatic.

O'CONNOR: Were you just guessing, or did you have any information that would lead you to believe the Soviet Union wouldn't respond if combat troops were sent in?

AMORY: Oh, I knew they wouldn't respond because they hadn't declared any blockade at that point. No, I've been, I won't say an expert on Berlin, but I've been on the Berlin task force in the last administration and under this one. I knew how basically cautious they were and that, if properly interpreted, this was an internal security measure of the East Zone. This wasn't a play against Berlin. This was to keep the working population from just attriting itself and making the whole East Europe look unviable. So it was defensive, and I

don't think Mac Bundy or anybody else was worried about that. It was the military who were always. . . . You know, they have 1948 on the brain again. But I think Paul Nitze was very active in the task force and was a very sound and solid fellow; and then there was [Martin J.] Marty Hillenbrand in State; and I guess Foy Kohler was the chairman of it. But all of them were not rattled by this thing and were sort of annoyed at the degree of, well, annoyance that the President had that something dramatically different had happened, upsetting the world balance of forces. In fairness to him, you've got to crank in a factor which I had no personal contact with at all because I didn't go to Vienna -- but his exchange with Khrushchev in, what was that, June of '61? When they

had the Vienna meeting, he came home and said it will be a cold winter business, that he wondered what would be the next step. And we all worried about that a little. But the wall itself, the barrier first and then the bricked up cinder block wall, was a defensive not an offensive move.

O'CONNOR: But it sounds like Maxwell Taylor was afraid the Soviets would respond if a combat team was put in there. Was he rattled by this, as you put it? He said there would be casualties.

AMORY: Yes. What he was saying, I think, in fairness to him, is that the whole NATO shield is desperately thin -- you know, the Germans' forces where only two out of the twelve divisions were combat ready yet; the French had their whole army in Algeria. So he was looking at this and

saying, "Gosh, I've got a very inadequate number of pieces to play this chess game, and this is just taking one off the board and putting it in the box, so to speak, which is hopeless." I have a high regard for Max, and I wouldn't want this to indicate that I thought he was a bum general. I think that was a perfectly sensible reaction, and maybe I could have been persuaded that a battalion would be as good as a combat team. I just used combat team as a round lump of things the way a Roman would use legion or something like that.

Anyway, then, on Laos I saw a lot of [W. Averell] Harriman and little of Bundy and others and had something to do with [Chester L.] Chet Cooper's being put on the delegation to the Geneva meeting there that ultimately settled the Laotian thing.



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to the conversation. I remember one case where we were getting ready for a session with [Konrad] Adenauer on this gut question of whether or not you can fight a conventional war in Europe, and we developed a briefing and translated it into German so it could be given. . . . We had a very excellent -- I think it was a CIA; no, it was a military -- military translator fellow; he's a colonel. But we dress rehearsed that with the President, and then he gave it to Adenauer with, of course, just a few people there, but he sat through the whole rehearsal with simultaneous translation trying to put himself in the place of Adenauer, which is rather an interesting, dramatic way of how thoroughly he prepared himself for a key chief of state's meeting. That could be easily checked on the formal record

because, obviously, Adenauer didn't sneak in and out the back door. I should have kept a better diary at the time. Yes, now the one I don't seem to have here -- this hour meeting with Bundy. I think that, you see, is the one relating to my. . . . No, as I recall, it was indirect. I went to Bundy, and Bundy quoted the President to me. Obviously the President wouldn't have met with me for fifty-five minutes about what a GS-18 did; he didn't have time for that. Let me make a note. I've got these other books at home. I'll make a note to check that. Let me see, November what? three? November 3, '61, JFK, question mark. Well, I think maybe the thing to do is to break off here, and you can think of other things.

O'CONNOR: Okay, I've got a lot of other things. You've stimulated a number of questions.

Second Oral History Interview

with

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February 17, 1966  
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

AMORY:

It is true that on November 3, 1961, I have down "White House, 12 o'clock, running about an hour," and I think that's the one that was the dry run for the meeting with Adenauer that I mentioned before. But that's easy for you to check because it would show Adenauer meeting the next day or later that afternoon or something like that. And that was

essentially the presentation of an argument to him from both the intelligence point of view and the American military capability point of view -- on November 3, 1961 -- that the Russian armies on the ground in Germany and their potential reinforcements were not invincible in a conventional war, and that their divisions were much smaller than ours -- the strength of many of their so-called divisions were really little more than cadres -- and that Europe had the capacity to build itself up to where it didn't have to quiver and quake at the thought of the Russians running all the way to the English Channel. Adenauer was skeptical. His attitude was that, well, maybe they wouldn't run all the way to the English Channel, but what would happen if they just took

Hamburg and then just sat down there and said, "Okay, now, we want to settle for that." This was his fear, and as you know, this has persisted in German-American relations ever since. But we have at least gotten away from the early Dulles-Eisenhower views or the President [Charles] de Gaulle views that if anything happened at all and one platoon came across, we'd drop all the bombs in the arsenal. Now if that isn't the right date, this can be just applied to a different date because I do remember very clearly that thing.

Now other dates not on here: There was a meeting shortly after the Bay of Pigs in which Bobby Kennedy took a very prominent part and which I attended, which essentially reviewed what we could